

Jesus is ruling by his word

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Date: 14 February 2021

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church family. We're going to read all of chapter 1 of Acts. So Acts chapter 1, verse 1. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

And while staying with them, he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which he said, You heard from me, for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.

So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

[1 : 44] This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the zealot and Judas the son of James.

All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. In those days, Peter stood up among the brothers, the company of persons was in all about 120, and said, Brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

For he was numbered among us, and was allotted his share in this ministry. Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his bowels gushed out.

And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called, in their own language, Akeldama, that is, fields of blood. For it is written in the book of Psalms, So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

[3 : 45] And they put forward two, Joseph called Bersibus, who was also called Justice, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.

And they cast lots for them, and a lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Well, let me start with a little bit of a story.

Just after I finished uni, I was playing soccer at Newcastle in the car park late at night. That's not really relevant to the story. It's just something fun.

Anyway, I met this guy who went to a different church, and we just got chatting about what church we went to, and we kind of clicked. And I was in the market for a friend, so we decided to catch up.

And this guy, yeah, we seemed to click. I was enjoying it. After a few chats about God and what we believed, it soon became obvious that this guy wasn't just in the market for a friend.

[5 : 02] He had an agenda. I think his heart was in the right place, but he was really concerned that I didn't have a special connection with Jesus.

He was okay in calling me a Christian, but I didn't have a special connection with Jesus. He began urging me, you need to be baptised a second time to be filled with the Spirit.

Yeah, I didn't agree with his teaching. I knew that the Bible says that everyone who believes in the name of the Lord receives the Spirit.

We're all filled with the Spirit. But it still made me wonder. It still threw me a bit. It's like, am I missing out? Is there some special connection with Jesus that I'm missing out on?

He's going to church, and all the ordinary things of Christianity. Is that really the special connection with Jesus? Am I missing out on something? Let's face it, church can be pretty ordinary sometimes.

[6 : 05] The sermon can be dry. The songs aren't our preference. I'm not sure I enjoy that song, but I'm trying to not make a comment here. You come in tired and worried.

Is there something more? Is there a more direct way to encounter Jesus? Jesus is in heaven, we're told, in Acts.

How is Jesus active on earth? How do we experience Jesus' immediate input in our lives? How do we receive his counsel? How do we get his comfort and encouragement?

How do we get his correction and his teaching, his instructions? How do we hear his voice? He's alive. How do we hear his voice? How do we know who he truly is and what he wants us to do?

I think the story in Acts today offers us a sure way to hear Jesus' voice that produces the life of faith we want, the life of faith we need.

[7 : 07] So when the angels were talking to the apostles, three times they mentioned heaven. It's almost like it's emphasised.

It's drilled in that Jesus is now in charge from heaven. And these ordinary men of Galilee are meant to be his ambassadors. Has he left the mission up to them?

Is he just absent now? Well, on that short walk from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, I reckon their heads must have been spinning.

So much has gone on in those six weeks since Jesus died. So much has been going on. But I think there was two things that probably would have landed heavy on their minds.

Two things would have been clear to them. The first thing that was clear was they knew Jesus was alive. They'd seen him. He'd given many proofs to demonstrate he is alive.

[8 : 01] And if he's alive, there's no doubt that he is Lord. If he can conquer death, he is Lord. He is Lord of all. They were sure that he's ascended, he's ruling from heaven, which means the promised time of the blessing of God under his king has started.

It's begun. And they were part of it. But they were there. They were part of this, this new kingdom. They would have been filled with joy and excitement. It would have been a wonderful time.

And then I think the second thing that would have been laying heavy on their hearts is that they had a critical role to play. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

That's a big job. The Lord is determined to gather in his died-for people. He's going to get them all. And they're going to be the ones to share that good news.

They had a massive job ahead of them. So joy and excitement, but what a job. So at this point, I'd expect Luke in the story to jump straight from here to chapter 2.

[9 : 21] We need the Spirit to come. We need God's Spirit to come and empower these guys to achieve this mission. But Luke pauses.

And to be honest, I've been wrestling with this all week. Why? Why this second half of chapter 1? Chapter 2 is way more exciting, let's be honest. Although I suppose the gory details of Judas are kind of interesting.

But why the second half? He makes us pause and I think he draws our attention to the apostles. Here's where I think Luke is laying some groundwork.

Some really important groundwork that we must understand before we launch into the mission of Jesus gathering in his people. So why do we need to hear about Judas?

Why do we need to hear about that? Why do we need to know about his replacement? I think this is the reason. Because everything you and I know about the true and living Jesus, his words, what he did, what he achieved in his death and resurrection, what he calls us to do now, everything, everything you know for sure, comes to us through the first-hand testimony of the apostles and their teaching.

[10 : 47] It's our only reliable source. And with the Old Testament obviously supporting them in that testimony. So I think this is why Luke deals with the problem of Judas.

There's a glaring public scandal that taints the 12's credibility. So we're going to jump to verse 15 and do the second half first, in a sense.

So we're going to go to verse 15 to 26 and then we'll come back to verses 12 to 14. So Luke tells us that it was public knowledge in Jerusalem at the time that Judas had bought a field with the money he got for betraying Jesus.

And falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. I don't think he's just trying to add colour to the story.

Like that is, fortunately most of the children are off in their classes. But he's not just adding colour. Why do we need to know this? I think it's because to meet such a sudden end, to have his lifeblood spilled out and his corpse to lay in an open field, to Jewish ears that would just clearly say, God has judged this man.

[12 : 08] These 12 weren't elected by people. They didn't appoint themselves.

They were chosen by Jesus himself. And yet one of them turned against him and was clearly judged by God. So can this really be the new people of God, the new Israel symbolised by the number 12?

Can this really be the new Israel if one of them defects? Can Jesus really be Lord who knows people's hearts if his choice turns on him?

Can Jesus be Lord if one of his representatives of the new people of God is cursed by God? I think that's the problem.

That's the scandal. And it was public knowledge at the time. So this is where Peter satisfies the problem by listening to God's word.

[13 : 15] He says, Brothers, the scriptures had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas. So then he quotes Psalms 69 and 109, where it's King David lamenting that one of his close companions is attacking him, and he's calling on the Lord to remove this man from among Israel.

The point is, Judas wasn't a surprise. It wasn't a surprise to the Lord. The Lord was in charge the whole time.

It actually serves to confirm that Jesus fulfils the pattern of King David with Judas attacking him. It shows that scripture is fulfilled.

He is the Christ. And John 17, 12 is a really helpful verse for understanding Judas. Judas is the exception that proves the rule.

This is what Jesus prays about his people in John chapter 12. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost, except the son of destruction that the scripture might be fulfilled.

[14 : 32] Judas is the exception that proves the rule. Jesus is in charge. Judas was, the scripture said that Judas would do this, and not one is missing except this exception.

So the stain of Judas, the public scandal, actually serves to show that Jesus is in charge. He is the son of David, fulfilling scripture.

And I suppose because of the number 12 representing the new Israel, they need a replacement for Judas. I wonder at this point how the two men were feeling in the crowd.

So there's 120. We've probably got, I'm not sure, 150 or so in the room at the moment. There's 120, we're told, in this first church. And as Peter's describing who can take this place of Judas, there's only two who qualify.

I wonder how they were feeling when Peter was saying this. The spotlight was just on them. The casting of lots is not mentioned again.

[15 : 45] Acts, I think we really get confused with the book of Acts. We think because it's a story that we need to do likewise. It's a story. It's not telling us we need to cast lots to make decisions.

It's describing. It's not telling us, it's not prescribing us to do that. So don't go and flip a coin for who to marry and call it God's will. That's not the point of this.

The point of casting lots was the apostles had to be chosen by the Lord. It's not just elected, but chosen directly by the Lord.

And they knew the proverb that said that the lot is cast into the lap and every decision is from the Lord. Let's focus on what the apostles had to have.

Who could qualify? What were their credentials? And that's in verses 21 and 22, if you want to have a look there. Peter says, So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

[16 : 59] They must have seen and heard Jesus' entire ministry, his crucifixion, his ascension, and most centrally, his resurrection, that he is alive, he is the Lord.

The apostles are our window into Jesus. They are the conduit. They are the way that we hear the good news of salvation.

Salvation comes to us through what they have seen and heard, their firsthand experience. So to return to the question I started with, how is Jesus speaking today?

It is through the word of the apostles' testimony and their teaching. And by God's grace, this is written down for us in the New Testament. It's the New Testament with the Old Testament shedding light on the gospel and confirming it, that we can hear our Lord's voice.

Jesus is speaking through his word. He is accessible. The word is living and active.

[18 : 17] He is speaking through the apostolic word. So it's important to clarify, it's not the apostolic office that Jesus speaks through today.

This is where the Catholics put way too much emphasis on the human office, the role, as if Peter being in charge of the church goes down generation after generation.

There's nothing in the Bible to say that. It's not the office that's the power of Jesus. It's the message. It's the witness. It's what they heard and saw.

It's the gospel message that has the power. I think we even see it in the rest of the story of Acts. We start off following Peter and John. But after Peter and John, we get Stephen, who wasn't an apostle.

We get Barnabas. And then we get Paul, or Saul, who turns into Paul, who was an enemy of the gospel. In chapter 8, when the Jews are driven out, or the Christians are driven out of Jerusalem, we're told that wherever they were scattered, they preached the gospel.

[19 : 23] So even in the book of Acts, it doesn't completely follow the apostles. And just have a listen to these key summary statements that Luke gives throughout the story.

Let me read them out to you. So in chapter 6, verse 7, So Luke pauses at key points and goes, It's not the apostles that have the power.

It's the word of God that has the power. And disciples are added to their number. Or chapter 12, verse 24, There will be enemies to the gospel.

They're going to meet their end eventually. The word of God will just keep going. Or chapter 13, verse 49, And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

And that was a Gentile region. So Luke actually shows us that it's the word of God. It's the message of the apostles that has the power. Jesus is speaking and saving by the power of his word.

[20 : 45] Wherever the truth of what the apostles have said is spoken, there you have the word of God. I really like John Woodhouse. His quote here, he just simply says it, and I think it just clarifies things really nicely.

He says it this way, Where there is the word of God, and faith in God because of that word, there is the totality of Christianity. Let me repeat that.

It sounds really simple and duh, but it's crucial. It's crucial. Where there is the word of God, and faith in God because of that word, there is the totality of Christianity.

If you want access to Jesus, listen to his word. It's as simple as that. And that word produces good fruit.

In a sense, you don't have to take their word for it. You can see the fruit of the apostles' message, the gospel. And I think we see it today. The fact that we're even gathered here today to listen to God's word is fruit of God's word saving.

[22 : 09] So that brings us back to verses 12 to 14. I think Luke gives us a glimpse into the difference that the apostles' word makes. You don't have self-reliant people, but you've got humble, reliant people.

If Jesus is in charge from heaven, if he's the one who's going to gather his people from all the earth, if they need his Holy Spirit to do that, then his people pray.

They recognize they don't have the power in themselves to live the life of faith and be the effective witness in our own strength. This community is characterized by prayer.

We need the Lord's help. In a sense, that's the right way to be gazing up so that the men were told, stop gazing into heaven, kind of get on with the job.

By the angels. But we should be gazing up in the sense we need help. The difference the gospel makes is it turns people into humble, dependent people who need Jesus every step of the way.

[23 : 25] The other thing we see in verses 12 to 14 is that they're united. They aren't just doing their own thing as each think is best, but they're united in one purpose.

There's a really lovely phrase, all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer. They're united. In a day when women were second-class citizens, here is this new community of Christ, men and women, together, side by side, united in worship and prayer.

It would have been very radical at the time, still is radical. And we see this unity even more as the story unfolds in Acts.

Like Samaritans, for Jews to welcome Samaritans, it was just unheard of, but that's what the gospel does. It breaks down walls for non-Jews to come into the people of God.

Here we are today, many non-Jews among us. It breaks down walls. There's unity. This word of God creates unity. The other thing we see in these verses is that this community is filled with changed people, transformed people.

[24 : 48] Think about Peter. Sometimes we just assume, oh yeah, of course Peter is leader of the church. He disowned Jesus three times. Why did the community recognise him as leader?

I think it's only possible if they accept the restoring power of Jesus' grace to Peter. That's the only way they could recognise him as leader.

Here is Peter, changed by the grace of Jesus. And the mention of Mary, I think is just the highlight that it was Jesus' brothers who were in this company of the 120.

These brothers were told in the gospel accounts, they were against Jesus. They ridiculed him. They didn't believe he was Lord and now here they are praying to him.

This community is full of people who are changed. They're transformed by the grace of God, by the grace of Jesus. So the word of the apostles creates good fruit.

[25 : 56] Prayerfulness, unity, transformed lives. So how is Jesus active on earth? If he's up in heaven, how do we hear his voice?

It's through the apostolic word of the gospel preserved for us in the living word, the written word. And by that word, lives are changed, people are united, and we pray to him because we believe he is in charge.

He is Lord. The Lord is still active and ruling and saving by his word today.

I think the fact that we're here is fruit of that. So a few questions for us to finish. Are you engaging with the Lord?

If he is speaking through his word, are you treating his word like it's his word? What will that look like?

[27 : 01] It will make us learners. It will make us a community of learners, not just individually, but a community of learners, learning from each other, from scripture. Not just learning information, but as Marty prayed for us at the beginning, that we would be changed when we encounter the word of God.

There was a time when I was just going through Bible reading and it was just feeling so dry and dull and a duty. The thing that changed it for me was when I realised I wasn't coming to be changed.

As soon as I started going, God, show me something new, it became alive again. Are we engaging with the word of the Lord?

And the second thing is for us to see the massive privilege it is to be part of that community that can pass on the word of God.

Every time that we say something that is true based on the gospel, we can trust that that is God's word.

[28 : 10] We can trust that even though we're weak as messengers, that the word of God is powerful. And we can be part of that. So, Jesus' word is powerful to save and transform and isn't that good news?

Will you pray with me as we finish? Let's pray. Father, in a sense, what we've heard today is simple, but Lord, I pray that it might go down deep in our hearts that we would believe that you have preserved your word for us so that we would hear you speak.

Lord, thank you that we can know you in truth, not try and find you by our own intellect and our own imaginings, but that we can know you truly through your written word preserved for us.

Thank you for filling your apostles with your spirit so that we can trust what they say. Lord, thank you that you fill us with your same spirit so that we can understand what you say and be transformed.

Lord, I pray that you would make us as a church a community that comes to you expecting to hear you speak and wanting to be changed. Lord, I pray that you would help us to be faithful witnesses of this change as we pass that on to others as you give us opportunity.

[29 : 46] Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.